

WOMEN AS THE CUSTODIANS OF AFRICAN TRADITIONS IN AYI KWEI ARMAH'S *FRAGMENTS*

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ABSTRACT

In the contemporary scenario, folks who are embracing righteous mannerism and communal uprightness for a viable social order will surely encounter the devastating sway of public and ethical revelations leading to inter and intra societal clashes. As soon as family, a constructive social unit embraces an indifferent stance towards a person's veracity, over and over again it will culminate into psychological turmoil or viciousness, as depicted through protagonist Baako, his blind grandmother Naana, and his Puerto Rican psychoanalyst girlfriend, Juana.

OBJECTIVES: *The objective of this research paper is to analyze the role of descendants and faith healers, insignias of prominence and admiration – who hunts for Africa's restoration from its trodden civilization in order to delineate the eminence of communal values in relation to that of an entity's unsubstantiated yearnings.*

SCOPE: *Paper will back comprehensive recognition through a relative exploration of feminine personages who have been assigned a novel role sans patriarchal and psychosomatic subservience to their counterparts, to a clash amid convention and innovation, communal and occult, or public and specific within a clique without hampering prosperous Afro conventional ethics.*

METHODOLOGY: *Qualitative Method.*

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KEYWORDS: *Ostentation, Pre-Colonial Astuteness, Neo-Colonialism & Feminine Power*

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INTRODUCTION

Fragments (1981), illustrating the canvas of avariciousness, pretension, exploitation, bribery, greed, egotism and imprudence, clogging the true quintessence of ethnically affluent African civilization, is an introspective pedestal to acquaint each and every native about the inter-woven well-heeled culture and beliefs of their nation, which are now on the verge of extinction and thereby need a befitting solution for its subsistence. Armah, at all times stands in forefront with his empathetic hand to provide a restorative touch to the inhabitants' warped psyche and accordingly bring glee and contentment to the nation-state. However, critics carry an altered outlook towards Armah's contribution as a healer; they consider that writer at this instant of time with his *Fragments* is in its embryonic phase to read the pulse of the nation and in that way acknowledges that the work in due course will unveil itself as grander to "*The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* in quality, profundity and originality" (Moore, "Armah's Second Novel," *Journal of Commonwealth Literature* 69). Nonetheless, the novel emerges as a benchmark to the whole genre of postcolonial literature,

which has a farfetched fanciful tinge to encounter "any compelling way with the maladies that have come with the colonial encounter" (Ogede, "Patterns of Decadence," *Modern Fiction Studies* 529).

A BEEN-TO

Fragments delineates Baako Onipa, a twenty six years old young man who has been to New York to pursue a vocational course in Creative Writing. Being a knowledgeable, thoughtful man, having a flawless futuristic vision, his ideas and reveries were trampled downright by the decrepit general public exemplified through the indispensable societal entity, the family. Baako with his indistinct voice and integrity raises the issues pertaining to social prejudice within and outside the society, which is being subdued by the so-called vanguards of humanity, leading to utter devastation of well-to-do socio-politico-cultural heritage of Afro civilization. This contemporary African society is comprehensively disintegrated amidst global malady and blurred philosophy. Besides social insanity, this young man proves to be a symbol of unbiased perception in the middle of this culturally distorted world and accordingly, transpires as a remedial foundation for public augmentation. Conversely, being thoroughly acquainted with this debauched society, Baako still steadfastly holds individualism as a riposte to despicable existence which is further boosted by the gentle presence of worldly wise astuteness of Baako's visionless grandmother- Naana, and salutary sway of his psychiatrist friend- Juana.

Baako, a committed and an enthusiastic professional after spending five years at New York arrives unexpected to his hometown. He is a "been-to" (47) who is anticipated to bring laurels to his family as well as to his society in the form of materialistic possessions, "to come back, laden with all the wonders of Western technology" (Peterson, "Loss and Frustration," *Kunapipi* 57). As an upright person Baako considers these trivial belongings as an emblem of inward annihilation and thereby discards them. Yet, failing to prove fit into the role of a "been-to", the society and specifically his family castoffs him. A "been-to" is an individual who is adulated for bringing opulence to his people and in so doing elevated to an advanced social standing in and outside the clan, portraying him as a demi-god offering distinctive adulation.

Baako is thus, compared to "Brempong- 'the prototype ... been-to' - (Yankson, "The Eagle that Refused to Soar," *Asemka* 53), who met him on his return journey. Brempong is a classic depiction of a detestable, pompous and an egomaniac, whose only concern is to consume his share from the domestic as well as the transnational cake. While giving a glance at Baako's light baggage, a pictogram of rebellion contrary to the ritual of carrying international treasures back home, Brempong feels perturbed about Baako's immature behaviour of not following the foot-steps of a conventional "been-to" because when "a Ghanaian has ... a chance to go abroad and is returning ... it's clear from any distance he's a been-to coming back" (47) and thus, Brempong suggests the young man that, "There are important things you can't get to buy at home. Every time I go out I arrange to buy ... suits ... I got two good cars on this trip" (45).

On Brempong's advent at Accra airport, the grandiose reception rendered to him by the ostentatious natives makes Baako disconcerted. The neo-Ghanaian society, a mirror to the awful white mannerisms reveres the hypocrite for the substantial affluence which he has acquired by putting his uprightness at stake. Baako was extremely anxious witnessing these phonies whose sole drive is to believe in a fictitious realm where every single unreal stuff is treasured and admired. In the post-independent Africa, the neocolonial proletarian-elite order is delineated through a flattering adoration rendered to the representatives of "white metropolitan presence" (Armah, "A Mystification," *Pan-African Journal* 141-151) signifying Brempong "a very very big man" (55) who senses the pulsation of the mass and gratifies the covetous prospects of his relations.

Still, Baako and Naana toil hard to conserve their steady consciences and ethics by rolling against the surge and consequently fall prey to their self-differing yearnings culminating into Baako's cerebral breakdown and Naana's salvage through her death-wish. However, Naana, a repository of ancestral acumen perceives Baako's fruitful homecoming as the rites of creating the circle for grandson's innocuous arrival had been accomplished successfully. "Each thing that goes ... returns" (1) thus, anticipating young man's return to his native town.

WOMEN – SAVIOURS AND DESTROYERS

Family, a minuscule version of society denoting a magnificent corpus of well-off moral principles and ideals of a pre-colonial state is in an utter state of devastation signifying degenerated and fragmented breathing corpses in this newfangled communal structure in *Fragments*. The utterly distorted and chaotic social order, considering itself to be striding towards zenith is in a way reflecting the fanciful world of gluttony, self-centeredness and bigotry epitomized through the character sketches of Efua - Baako's mother and Araba - his sister, who leave no occasion of gaining personal riches even at the cost of worthy conventional rituals and ceremonials. The transitional state of African social set-up is landing gullible natives into a double-split condition wherein they could not comprehend the factual spirit of their commendable traditional legacy and therefore in order to prove themselves to be at par with the western sphere, these humble beings try to mimic the white mannerisms and eventually ends up into a mentally deranged stage. However, among this ocean of perplexed human beings, there are certain steadfast individuals who still believe in righteousness and integrity and even shield naive from becoming a victim. Naana - the protagonist's blind grandmother and Juana - Baako's girlfriend are real archetypes of this upright domain, who act as restorative remedies to Baako's distressed consciousness.

Baako has turned a puppet in hands of the feminine power, who play with him according to their own whims and wishes without taking young man's yearns and beliefs into consideration. Efua is exemplified as Baako's utmost woe as she enunciates in tangible form a mother's expectations and hopes from her loved creation that would take "no cognizance of his manhood and individuality but would rather destroy him ... This type of love is so possessive ... that it smothers rather than hastens the growth of the child into a separate individual" (Ola, "Ayi Awei Armah," *NSAL* 8). Efua believes that being mature in age and experience, she is acquainted well with all the dilemmas of the world and thereby directs her son to lead his life in accordance with her living style. She considers Baako's honesty and uprightness as a chief impediment in gratifying her worldly needs and so is discontented with her son for not fitting well into the role of a "been-to". Considering her to be an idealist who manages the world with perfection, ironically it is Efua who stands responsible for her son's psychological condition which subsequently landed him in an asylum. According to her, all neo-urban traits viz. flattery, extortion, bribery and bootlicking are inevitable features for human survival and those who reject to flow along this stream in their way to realize their potentials, will definitely drown one day.

Araba, Baako's younger sibling was an exact replica to her mother who too being egotistical believes that self-aggrandizing is not a crime and one can commit it anytime, anywhere and even at any cost. The young lady has experienced five miscarriages and in a little while after her brother's homecoming, her health deteriorates again and is on the verge of encountering the previous misfortunes, but she along with her son was saved well in time by Baako via donating blood. Araba though acknowledges Baako's arrival as an insignia of bliss, but with a double connotation, "it is such a good thing, your coming.... Other blessings will follow" (85), nonetheless this fortune appears to be transitory as Araba loses the baby during the "outdooing ceremony" (86) as both mother and daughter have distorted the traditional rites for self-glorification by preponing the baby's ceremony from the usual eighth day to the fifth day. Araba's

unscrupulous plans could not be materialized for two reasons; firstly that Baako doesn't bring thriving stuff from abroad and secondly that the baby meets an undesirable death because of the avaricious nature of the ladies who in order to capitalize from the ceremony, opines that a ceremonial held more than few days after salary-day would be inoperable as it could not procure the desired materialistic gains.

Baako and Naana after getting acquainted with Araba and Efua's exact intentions accuse and warn them "[are you] so pressed [that] you have to make money out of the child?" (88), but all in vain. The grandmother, a symbol of progenitor's insight knows well that "dragging him [the child] out into this world for eyes in heads that have eaten flesh to gape at" (97) is a covetous attempt on part of family as the infant is yet under the gaze of the spirits, "the child is only a traveler between the world of spirits ... he must be protected. Or he will run screaming back, fleeing the horrors prepared for him up here" (97). Eventually the forewarning "great haste to consume things ... have taken no care ... to produce" (199) turns true with child's demise and Naana clearly professes that this calamity has moved into the household as a consequence of the neo masses' loss of trust in the "wisdom of those gone before" (199). Venerating a new god by means of ostentation has become a ritual to be celebrated among the post-colonial inhabitants who have lost their belief in universal supremacy of the precursors and thereby fall an easy quarry to an imminent doom ordained for subtle folks.

The disparaging persona of Efua at times is exhibited as a measure of her adoration towards her invaluable son. After realizing the impact of the mutilation she has done to her son's psyche, Efua pleads compassionately: "I was hoping you would ... take joy in the thing ... and finish it.... Forgive me ... I won't accuse you anymore" (179), and in due course was pardoned as her words are full of optimism and transformation pointing towards decolonization, a dire need of the hour.

OSTENTATION AND IMPERSONATION

Post-colonialism emerges out as a solution to the predicament of the colonial mass who were once detained and traumatized by the whites. However, instead of evolving as independent beings that are powerful enough to wage a battle for their state's emancipation, the natives themselves got intensely gripped by the conduct and behaviour of their colonial masters, a fabricated perception of European preeminence. Multitude of Afro writers, viz. Soyinka, Ngugi, Liyong and many more conversely have been intolerant towards this pestilence of imitation and mimicry that has taken a paramount position in the lives of the populace. The playwrights meticulously pitted against the fact of foreign ascendancy and reverence and have raised their voice against reliance on foreign prototypes which hamper the national precedence and will eventually stagnate the homeland.

Though, living in an era of physical freedom, still the bourgeois class is psychologically clutched with an irrepressible longing to bear a semblance to their western masters and in order to live up to their aspiration the natives started impersonating western hair-style, attires, cosmetic usage and even their language. Efua, the novel's prime parasite is a pioneer to this practice of mimicking who is absolutely lost in sheer appreciation for a black duo in a calendar who has bleached its skin to forced yellow-brown by "AMBI-EXTRA [Capitals Original] skin-lightening cream" (87), a virtuously undesirable article of west. The bizarre mindset of the inhabitants is seen aptly through the portrayal of calendar wherein numerous natives are shown standing open-mouthed in approbation of the bleached couple's skin, thus, depicting the loss of one's aboriginal distinctiveness erected on slanted tenets. Even the deference bestowed upon Brempong and Baako - the purported redeemers of the kinfolk's opulence, the "hope, pride, joy ... Plus prestige" (157) - at airport exemplifies the

obliterated stance of the citizens who have held in reserve their gratitude for well-heeled persons, making Baako anxious over the undesirable splendid celebration.

The gathering at the "outdooing ceremony" too proves a sham because African elites were looking like clowns adorning and enduring warm western garments evidently inapt for the tropical weather except Baako who still embracing his identity was an odd one out "the embodiment of societal sickness" (Ogede, "Patterns of Decadence," *Modern Fiction Studies* 536). This bland and scrounging fraction of society are identical to apes who lack inventiveness and pertinently fits themselves into the "role of the manager of Western Enterprise" (Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* 140-154). Conversely, the foremost concern is to reestablish nation-state's cultural heritage by readdressing these creams of the crop who are fortifying them as the agents of mindless colonial imitation.

PRE-COLONIAL WISDOM

The present-day Ghanaian society in sum has sunk into the marshland of crumbled conventional ethics and values in absenteeism of any discrete dogma. People with their imprudent materialistic pursuit have severed ties with ancestors and have become unsympathetic towards the naive who still adore their traditional beliefs and ideals, but then are labelled insane and consequently are secluded and even psychologically deranged by the black privileged class. Naana and Baako symbolize the naive carrying "an emotional tie" (Lurie, "Fragments," *Ba Shiru* 33) and "rapport" (Frazer, *The Novels of Ayi Kwei Armah* 30), denoting voice of the judicious, directing and counselling natives against adversative colonial sway but wage a lost war. Naana, being blind can flawlessly perceive the toxicities of the neo-colonial world in contrast to the alleged eyed individuals who are mentally impaired to visualize the misfortunes around them.

Her seeing eye is a spiritual opposition to the blind seeing eyes around her. (Peterson, "Loss and Frustration," *Kunapipi* 53)

These professed eyed folks entirely detached them from their descendants considering them obsolete and tosh as exemplified well through Naana's character-sketch. Naana avers: "I am a person no more ... but for them it has too long been an annoying burden" (2), "the remnant of something that passed by and was immediately forgotten ... I myself am lost here, a stranger ... in a town of strangers" (195). Naana is undoubtedly a link between the modern transformed realm and the realm of the ancestors - a bond between bygone, existent and the imminent - the succession of natal, demise and renaissance. Being a seer, she wants to shield her clan as well as her culture from the worldly hardships by adulating the descendants who barely gets reverence from the contemporary alive cadavers.

Undoubtedly all the premonitions of Naana - be it infant's untimely death or Baako's mental derangement - turns out to be true but still the old lady is left unheard and thereby she wishes to leave this fragmented sphere and greets death as the only means of salvation to join her men, "THE TIME [Capitals Original] has come ... and I too am ready to go.... When there is no use, the spirit ... yearns for the world of other spirits ... the spirits themselves hope and wait for the new one coming" (195), and so, "it [is] useless to try and make them [ancestors] see my blind suffering and to cry to them for help" (196). Thus, Naana's adoration, fretfulness and invocations appear as the cradle of warmth and affection for Baako and the future generations who will certainly comprehend the treasures of their majestic African heritage.

JUANA – A SILVER LINING

In this unreservedly rambling world where every soul is transfixed in the gleam of avidity, believing all ills vexing civilization viz. flattery, corruption, especially imitation as inevitable, there are still upright individuals like Baako and

Naana who are insurgent against the prevailing order but are destined to land in adverse circumstances such as seclusion, asylums or likewise. Juana, a Puerto Rican national and by vocation a psychiatrist also has her place among these ingenuous folks who are well thought-out extraneous in this wretched world as they have risen against the prevalent tide. Baako, being considered a misfit, a non "been-to" by his family was under duress transported to a mental asylum where he met Juana, his physician for the very first time. Being a subtle human, Juana recognizes Baako's dreariness and accordingly turns into a spring of vigor for him. She considers Baako a true mirror to her inner self and in consequence becomes his companion and in due course his beloved.

It is with Juana ... he ... experiences ... moments of overlapping vision and ... blinding moments of sensual joy which illuminate ... the tenderest and ... explicit scenes of love making. (Moore, "Armah's Second Novel," *Journal of Commonwealth Literature* 70)

Amidst of all obstructions, Baako recuperates from the ills of self-pity through Juana's assistance who in turn emboldens him to uphold his integrity. She avers: "You're not a criminal. You were trying to do something. It isn't wrong just because people say it is" (190). Baako correspondingly reciprocates her love, the "resistance ... so strong in his words was gone, and his body next to hers felt totally willing" (191), the unison signifying completeness, the emblem of optimism, liberty and retrieval. Juana therefore, in similar veins to Naana turns into a silver lining to the despicable spectacle of gluttony and treachery.

FEMININE VIGOUR

A unanimously acknowledged adage "behind every successful man there is a woman" stands equally correct for Baako with some add-ons that "behind every dead duck there is a woman too." Baako glides with the twofold personae of females in his life and ponders: "Women destroying, women saving. Every bit of sense hurried to destroy ... in headlong explosion" (180). The kinfolk bearing a "cargo mentality" never understand Baako, his righteous ways or his words and subsequently bundled him off to an asylum despite of dissent, where paradoxically being psychologically at liberty he started giving an earnest vent to his vocation. Armah is a forerunner in twiggling females' persona of creativity, destruction and the principle of feminine fertility:

Armah ... demonstrated the greatest insight and sensitivity as well as ... ability to ... portray the problems and fears of the African woman and to delve ... deep into the wells of her being. Armah ... towers ... in capturing the enigmatic condition of good and evil in her nature. (Ola, "The Feminine Principle and the Search for Wholeness in *The Healers*," *UFAHAMU* 73-74)

The writer explores the leitmotif of females as lovers and redeemers through the character portrayal of Naana and Juana, apt symbols of creation and cure, but *Fragments* delineates a differing persona too wherein feminine voice is the expression of devastation, a speech that perceives adept individuals as illegitimate living beings who are not worth living for. Perhaps, Africa does not have any space for idyllic visionaries like Baako. Thus, to sustain swiftly abolishing universal customs, womenfolk ascends as the fountain pate of feminine principle implying adoration, stimulus, and potency, "the bond of love ... holds the only hope of temporary salvation ... the negative aspects of the feminine in the Oyos and Efwas must be resisted ... since woman is both destroyer and builder" (Ola, "Ayi Kwei Armah," *NSAL* 10-11).

RELEVANCE OF THE TITLE

The title of *Fragments* delineates its relevance through the pre-colonial perspicacity and conventional intellect of proficient Naana, who acknowledges that "the larger meaning which lent sense to every small thing ... has shattered.... What remains of my days will be filled with more broken things" (196), thus, referring to the heart-rending experiences of Naana and Baako, the sagacious lot who stumble upon an arduous clan and community. The society of *Fragments* reflects general public as a conveyor belt "for cargo ... an alienated and dehumanized society" that considers western learning as a "magical force which can produce the cargo" (Peterson, "Loss and Frustration," *Kunapipi* 61-62). Armah infers this epidemic as a fatal consequence of colonial aftermath on the subject people, who resolutely rely on the borrowed culture - a cul-de-sac - that intensifies corruption, nepotism, ostentation and patronage in postcolonial scenario. Therefore, for attaining genuine freedom specifically mental deliverance, these lethal fissures should be filled meticulously.

CONCLUSIONS

The current realm displays individuals in a state of dilemma and distress as "they no longer ... locate themselves socially, realize themselves sentimentally and declare who they are" (Juneja, "Post-Colonial Novel" 14). These purported intellectuals are whirling in the water of sluggishness, gluttony, egocentrism, ostentation and sycophancy and now realizing their existential legitimacy they are toiling effortlessly to restore their lost personality. Baako, an honest being who has embraced psychological malady because of the unsolicited expectancies of his kinfolk, the imprudent who are still holding the tatters of a thoroughly corrupt and shattered world, peering "behind the veil ... find in wonder a more fantastic world, making us fools in our own eyes to have believed that the old paltriness was all" (200-201). The young lad envisages armed menfolk shooting petrified birds hovering above savanna trees - an apparition of neo-Africa's dismay at the budding syndrome of white servility.

Naana, despite of all neo-colonial foibles, is proud of her grandson's righteous ways and vows to support him even after her death, "When I go I will protect him ... if my strength is not enough I will seek out stronger spirits and speak to their souls of his need of them" (198), a divine power without which a man becomes susceptible to the antagonistic rudiments of subjugation. Juana too like worldly-wise grandmother offers a warm and therapeutic touch to Baako for combating his mounting anxieties.

Therefore, Naana with ancestral astuteness and Juana with adoration help the young man shed his diffidence and bafflement and subsequently augment their consciousness to join the crusade to unfetter gullible from the shackles of expectancy and covetousness - a philosophy that endorses conscience as a mentoring essence for attaining corporeal as well as psychological deliverance from acquisitiveness, pretentiousness, bribery and analogous tribulations that plague Africa.

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